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# **Interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology and ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation with Malaysian nurses**

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## **Abstract**

**Background** This paper draws on a research study conducted with Malaysian nurses who studied on part-time Transnational Higher Education post-registration top-up nursing degree programmes provided by one Australian and two UK universities. The interpretive paradigm and hermeneutic phenomenological design are the most popular methods used in international cross-cultural research in health care, nurse education and nursing practice. Their inherent appeal is that they assist researchers' to explore lived experiences. The ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation was also used to provide meaning, clarity and insight.

**Aim** To examine the use of interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology and ethnographic principles of cultural interpretation in this research study.

**Discussion** To enable the researcher to undertake international cross-cultural research and illuminate Malaysian nurses' views for the reader, some key factors need to be considered. This is because cultural aspects will influence the information participants' provide. Useful strategies that western researchers' can adopt to co-create the research text with interviewees are outlined. The paradigm and research designs used revealed the views and experiences of Malaysian nurses.

**Conclusion** Interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology enabled exploration of participants' experiences, whilst the ethnographic principles of cultural interpretation allowed the researcher's reflexivity to provide emic and etic views for the reader.

**Implications for practice** This paper adds to the discussion on the paradigm and research design for international cross-cultural research in the Asian region. It identifies the influence participants' cultural values have on their confidence and level of disclosure towards western researchers'.

**Keywords:** Interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology, ethnography, cultural interpretation, nursing research, research design.

## **Introduction**

Western countries collaborate mainly with Asian countries to provide Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) post-registration top-up nursing degree programmes as there is limited part-time delivery of these types of degrees in Malaysia. Further, there is also recognition of the opportunity to attain western expertise, innovation and degrees. In the 'flying faculty' models of TNHE post-registration top-up degree programmes, academics 'fly in' from their country for one to two weeks to deliver teaching and then 'fly back' to their country and academic roles.

International cross-cultural research is essential to evaluate the TNHE programmes provided in Malaysia because hidden strong cultural factors influence the mind-sets, and impact on the conversations and behaviours, of Malaysians. In this study, the programmes were provided by one Australian and two UK universities (Arunasalam, 2013; 2016). Schutz (1976: 104) states, "*every social group ... has its own private code, understandable only by those who have participated in it*". Thus, to undertake research with Malaysian nurses, some key factors need to be recognised.

This paper outlines the rationale for choosing the paradigm and research designs. It also identifies influential aspects and strategies that may be adopted.

### **Interpretive paradigm**

In research, a paradigm infers to a pattern, structure, tradition, approach, model, frame of reference, body of research and methodology and could be seen as a framework for observation and understanding (Babbie, 2011; Creswell, 2013). The paradigm chosen was influenced by the research aim to explore Malaysian nurses' perspectives of their intercultural teaching and learning experiences in the TNHE programmes. This was because individuals encounter and view the same situation differently. Participants' meaning making of their experiences will be based on their own stances and backgrounds.

Denzin & Lincoln (2011) stress that the interpretive paradigm focuses on the shared patterns of meaning in the participants' experiences with the researcher. The researcher reveals these and articulates an explicit description of the individual, and cultural and societal expectations (Arunasalam, 2016). Within the interpretive

paradigm, there are several design approaches, such as phenomenology, ethnography and case study.

## **Research Design**

A research design is a plan of exploration that fits with the theoretical framework and aims of the research study (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010). The researcher uses their presumptions to determine and draw conclusions to create understanding, as opposed to predicting behaviour (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). A people-centred approach was sought to identify nurses' views. This approach also supported the researcher's self-reflexivity and enabled them to be part of the research.

A phenomenological approach was initially considered as the focus of this study was everyday experiences and personal journeys. Van Manen (2014:14) described phenomenology as "*... the essence of phenomenon is universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon*". In looking into phenomenological research, the emphasis is also on uncovering participants' narrative accounts and any concealed meaning embedded in their words. Van Manen (2014:48) states this as the phenomenological text being "*...descriptive; as it names something. And in the naming, it points to something and it aims at letting something show itself.*" However, presumptions based on previous research, pre-reflective understandings and views of the researcher must be "*bracketed out*" Husserl (1964: 9). This will enable the participants' voices to speak for themselves instead of being a reflection of the researcher's views. Although the findings will be informative, it conceals the researcher's valuable views, experiences and understandings.

In reality, bracketing out the researcher's interpretation of the phenomena under study, is difficult as Merleau-Ponty (1962: 5) believed: "*we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of it*". Bourke (2014) agrees the researcher cannot avoid their own views influencing their judgement. However, not acknowledging the researcher's own contextual and personal frames of reference as a Malaysian and a UK resident, previous international student nurse, UK-trained and based nurse, academic and researcher would affect the validity of this research. The use of the researcher's preconceptions is different in

various designs e.g. phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. For this study, it was acknowledged that exploring, understanding and interpreting the researcher's experiences and views would support the authenticity of the explanations of the text. This led to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, informed by the work of Max van Manen (2014) being considered.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Within hermeneutic research, the participants reflect and reconsider the everyday issues they observed and experienced. One-to-one or group interviews are used to explore and gather participants' views and meaning making. It is based on what is said (Doody & Noonan (2013), what is said between the lines (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) and silence (van Manen, 2014). A Malaysian researcher with familiarity and understanding of the culture aspects would easily intermingle and become part of the Malaysian social setting. According to Bergold & Thomas (2012), participants' perceptions of who the researcher is will influence what they say.

Each participant's perspectives represent the experiences of a group of individuals within a particular setting. It must be recognised that Malaysians are conversant with English. However, English is not their first language. Further, their spoken English includes words from the languages used by the other ethnic groups'. If the nurses are informed that only English will be used in interviews, they may present an appropriate 'front', (Goffman, 1959). This means the nurses will answer the interview questions politely with the limited use of English words. Thus, informing them that both Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) and English would be used, will reduce their anxiety and feelings of self-consciousness. It may lead to the nurses speaking in English because they are not under pressure.

In Malaysia, the culture promotes agreement rather than critique (Baguley, Findlay & Kerby, 2015; King, 2008; Abdullah & Koh, 2009), thus, a nurse may be reluctant to criticise for fear of being judged. It may also be due to the past colonial influences, idealised merits of western education and the perceived higher status of western academics will influence the nurses when voicing their opinions to westerners. It is because feelings of inequality are deep-rooted in Malaysian nurses' minds. The nurses may display the classic Malaysian 'smile and silence' attitude of withholding

information, either as a protection or as being careful not to be frank on issues that may be destructive or have a negative repercussion. However, as a Malaysian with insights based on shared lived experiences, the researcher was able to cut across ethnic lines by speaking in Bahasa Malaysia, using local slang and humour to encourage participants to disclose confidential and revealing accounts that they may not disclose to a non-Malaysian. Iphofen (2011) believes that the establishment of trust for revealing information is a hidden dilemma that is decided by participants. The sensitivity of the issues that were being explored in this study meant it was questionable the Malaysian nurses would voice their perspectives to a detached western outsider. This is because they had not been socialised into the group (Schutz, 1976).

The researcher's reflexive experiences uncover personal insights and theories from the literature. These were questioned when analysing interview extracts in order to reveal and understand participants' perspectives. In being reflexive, the researcher also enables readers to see how their stance impacted the research process (Savin Baden, 2013). Richardson (2013: 959) argues reflexivity provides authenticity as *"knowing the self and knowing the research subject are intertwined due to historical and local knowledge"*. Further, the opinions of nurses are enhanced by the researcher's self-reflexivity. It is because the data is interpreted either through nurses' views or the cultural beliefs of Malaysian society or through the researcher's views.

Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the use of interview extracts to reveal participants' views as they are connected with their political, social and cultural backgrounds. The presentation of the findings also uncover the researcher's values and views as they interpret and reveal participants' reality.

The participants also appeared reluctant to provide any developmental feedback. It led to the researcher quickly reverting to the use of a gentler approach, with a beseeching tone that Abdullah (1992: 8) calls *"verbal seduction"*. This was to encourage participants to relate their experiences. In using this style, the 'we' orientation is enhanced as it allows interviewees to feel relaxed during their communication.

The researcher writes with an academic standpoint to develop understanding of the meaning patterns. Personal, professional and researcher views and experiences are integrated to provide a detailed research text for the reader.

### **Ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation**

The hermeneutic phenomenology research design is central to this study but the ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation with the emic and etic principle also informed the research. Agar (2000: 19) stresses that *“Ethnography is neither subjective nor objective but interpretive, mediating two worlds through a third”* to enable *“thick description”* (Geertz, 1973: 3) for understanding. In ethnographic studies, the researcher ‘lives like and lives with’ their sample population to study their behaviour in everyday context (Maanen, 2011; Wolcott, 2008)

Hermeneutic phenomenology informed by an ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation is often chosen by researchers as they can position themselves as either insiders and/or outsiders within their study. This enables the researcher to be sensitive to societal values. To determine either the ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ status, a combination of dimensions must intersect such as the researcher’s identity (gender and ethnicity), other features (age), time, location and the focus of the research, personality and power relationships between the researcher and the participants who are part of the research (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015. Umberson and Montez (2010:34) stress that neither stance is privileged to see the *“real truth as social experience and perception are continuously created by the social actors”*. The researcher uses their reflexive views to connect with the shared experiences of the interviewees in order to make sense of the meaning about participants’ and societal’ ways. This is to uncover the reality of participants’ experiences. As communication and language are intertwined, the ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation was used as it allows participants experiences to be understood through their communication and shared meanings within a culture (van Manen, 2014).

This allows the researcher to use an academic stance to develop meaning patterns of views to provide a thorough interpretation. It will also enable the reader to understand how the explanations of social meaning are part of a system of shared beliefs.

Researchers often position themselves as either insiders or outsiders as it enables critical inquiry throughout the research process. It acts as a sign-post of the decision-making undertaken in the research to make it transparent to the reader. The insider is someone whose biography (gender, race, etc), some intrinsic and some not, has insight of the deep-rooted cultural characteristics related to members of the group being researched. It enables a valid emic description. In contrast, researchers who are not familiar with the entrenched cultural aspects of the group, community and environment being researched and must rely on theories and perceptions are outsiders (Etherington, 2004). Succinctly, insiders “*cannot escape their past*” while outsiders are “*without a history*” of the research setting (Schutz, 1964: 34).

The stance a researcher adopts within an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology and ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation study requires continual reflexive mode. The hermeneutic approach allows exploration of experiences whilst the ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation enables the researcher to provide an insider’s view of participants’ values in order for readers or outsiders to understand why participants perceive their experiences in that way. This enables biases and assumptions to be considered, and the reasoning behind actions to be justified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The researcher’s identity, beliefs and experiences were ingrained and influenced decision-making throughout the research. Mainly, the sharing of experiences was to encourage nurses to contribute further. This is in line with Agar’s (2000: 251-252) tactics for cultures where “*interpersonal harmony, implicitness and understatement are valuable*”.

Co-creating the research text would ensure the researcher would not dominate the interpretations, or alter perceptions of the data collected, or the choices around including or excluding the nurses’ and the researcher’s views to provide both an emic and etic perspective for the reader. The decisions made with regards to which interview extracts to use were valuable. This was because the reader would have to see directly the nurses’ contributions in order to appreciate how their beliefs, behaviour and experiences were influenced by their cultural backgrounds.

## **Conclusion**



In this study, the interpretive paradigm allowed the shared patterns of meaning in the participants' experiences to be addressed. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed Malaysian nurses to reflect on their TNHE experiences whilst it enabled the researcher to be part of the research. The ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation that also informed the study enabled the researcher to position their self as an insider (knowledge and understanding of the community to allow privileged access to participants) or outsider (experience the setting under study as a visitor to create a detached view for readers). The key aspects and approaches that should be considered when undertaking an interpretive, hermeneutic and ethnographic principle of cultural interpretation research with Malaysian nurses have been outlined.

### **Implications for research and practice**

Personal insights both as a Malaysian and resident of the UK privileged the researcher by enabling understanding and interpretation of the Malaysian nurses views and experiences in order to enhance the findings for the reader. In an increasingly globalized economy, the impact of intercultural exchange has grown to show us difference, to widen knowledge. This adds to the discussion on the paradigm and research design for international cross-cultural research. It is pertinent that researchers are aware that cultural aspects will influence participants, their confidence and level of disclosure to westerners and implement the approaches outlined. This research which is based within the researcher's own social identity group provided insight when considering the TNHE context which does not give attention to the cultural disparities between western providers and the Asian society.

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